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Fyfe, Nicholas; Parr, Hester; Stevenson, Olivia; Woolnough, Penny

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‘To the end of the world’: Space, place and missing persons investigations

Nicholas Fyfe*

(n.r.fyfe@dundee.ac.uk)

**University of Dundee & Scottish Institute for Policing Research,
School of Social Sciences,
University of Dundee,
Dundee, DD1 4HN.**

Hester Parr

**University of Glasgow
Geographical and Earth Sciences,
University of Glasgow
Glasgow G12 8QQ**

Olivia Stevenson

**University of Glasgow
Geographical and Earth Sciences,
University of Glasgow
Glasgow G12 8QQ**

Penny Woolnough

**University of Abertay & Scottish Institute for Policing Research
School of Social and Health Sciences
University of Abertay
Dundee DD1 1HG.**

- **Corresponding author**

Introduction

Police investigations of major crimes are typically conducted in contexts where there is 'likely to be contested or ambiguous knowledge about how a particular incident transpired' (Innes, 2007, p.274). Such challenges are also routinely faced in the investigation of missing persons, defined as 'anyone whose whereabouts is unknown whatever the circumstances of disappearance'. (ACPO, 2005, p.8). In these inquiries ambiguity is rooted in the 'complex web of behaviours that surround the phenomenon of missing persons' (James et al, 2008), ranging from social problems, such as mental health issues and drug and alcohol abuse, to criminality in the form of domestic violence, child abuse or child abduction. In determining their response the police not only need to establish whether the disappearance is intentional or unintentional but also respect the right of an individual to go missing, particularly if there is no evidence that a crime has been committed, while treating relatives and friends who have reported an individual missing with compassion. There is therefore a high degree of 'moral ambiguity' around missing persons reports, presenting the police with important challenges in terms of their investigative response (Innes, 2002, p.7).

These challenges are compounded by the volume of missing persons cases which represent one of the biggest demands on the resources of police organisations. In the UK, for example, over 300,000 missing person's incidents were recorded by the police in 2012/13, equivalent to over 800 reports a day or one case being recorded by the police every two minutes (National Crime Agency, 2014). The financial costs of these investigations are also high relative to other demands on policing such as theft and assault and have been estimated in the UK to be at over £2000 for medium-risk cases or at least £700 million a year (Shalev-Greene and Pakes, 2013). Although up to 80% of all those reported missing will return within 24 hours, often without direct police intervention, there are over 1000 missing people who are still absent a week after going missing and although in 97% of cases no harm is recorded, there are still, on average, around 15 people a week who are found dead after being reported missing (National Crime Agency, 2014; Tarling and Burrows, 2004).

Against this background, this paper uses a qualitative approach to examine ways in which police officers attempt to 'manufacture certainty' in missing persons investigations and constructs an argument about how these inquiries are strongly informed by geographical notions of space and place. The paper is structured around three key phases or 'movements' within police investigations (Innes, 2007) each of which involves the mobilization of different forms of geographical knowledge. In the first stage of 'identifying and acquiring' information, the process of search is structured by knowledge about the possible spatial behaviours of missing people often generated using spatial profiling techniques. In the second phase of 'interpreting and understanding', more nuanced accounts of what may have happened to a missing person are constructed as the police attempt to 'place' a person's disappearance within a particular narrative based on their reading of the intelligence picture that emerges during the investigation. In the third phase of 'ordering and representing', the focus is on how the case is presented to internal audiences (senior police managers) and external audiences (the relatives of the missing person and the wider public) when investigators often invoke a notion of 'the end of the world' referring to how the geographical limits of the police search have been defined (see too Innes, 2007, p.255, Newiss, 1999; ACPO, 2010; and Fyfe et al, 2014). It is important to recognise, however, that these three phases rarely follow a simple linear chronology. Rather they are embedded in a cyclical process in which new information gathered over the course of an investigation often leads the police to re-interpret and re-consider their representation of a person's disappearance.

The research context and methods

This study of the police investigations of reports of missing persons formed part of a wider research project funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) involving a partnership between university researchers, police forces, the UK Police Missing Persons Bureau and the Missing People Charity. The project examined the experiences of 45 missing adults (via interviews with individuals identified through the sampling of police records of resolved missing person reports, see Stevenson et al, 2013) and the experiences of 25 families of missing persons (see Parr and Stevenson, 2013) but also included the detailed reconstruction of missing persons investigations using case files and interviews with the officers involved in these cases. A total of 12 cases were reconstructed drawn from the two

police forces with cases selected on the basis that they exemplify different types of investigation rather than being representative of *all* kinds of missing persons enquiry. Cases selected included those graded low and high risk and where there was a change in risk assessment as the investigation progressed; some cases were located within a single police force while others involved cross police force collaboration; and some cases were short term (the person was missing for a few hours) while others were longer term, running over several months and in one case the investigation was still open as the person has yet to be found.

Two key methods were used in relation to these cases. First, a deconstructive narrative analysis of police case notes was undertaken to build a thematic summary of how these notes and the associated police tasks effectively ‘produce’ particular interpretations of the events and people involved. Second, key officers (n= 21) involved with the reconstructed cases were interviewed, including Police Constables who provided the initial response and Senior Investigating Officers (SIOs) and Police Search Advisors¹ (POLSAs). Combining this analysis of case notes and interviews, this paper provides a narrative representation of specific cases in order to allow in-depth qualitative interpretation about the nature of missing person investigations.

‘Identifying and acquiring’: from searching to spatial profiling

The first phase of any investigation focuses on ‘identifying and acquiring’ information and in the case of a missing persons investigation this typically begins with a ‘call handler’ at a force control room responding to a report of someone about whom there is a concern regarding their whereabouts. At this stage, there is a high degree of reliance on standard operating procedures in the form of a series of questions focused on establishing key social

¹ POLSAs are officers who have received intensive, specialist training in search strategies and were first introduced in the 1980s in response to terrorist threats. Over time their role has extended first into criminal investigations and more recently, into missing persons inquiries. With regard the latter, the main role of the POLSA is to construct a search strategy and then execute and coordinate it using a range of police resources (such as local uniformed officers to carry out house-to-house inquiries, a police helicopter, an underwater unit, and dogs) as well as external organisations, such as mountain rescue teams and the coastguard.

and spatial information regarding the person's disappearance to inform an initial risk assessment of the case: Where were they last seen?, Is this out of character? What are their medical needs?, Do they pose a danger to other people?

Another high priority action will be the physical search of the missing person's home in case the person is hiding, has been hidden or has left any immediate clues, like a suicide note or evidence of taking a drugs overdose. Known as an 'Open Door Search' (ACPO, 2010, p.35), this provides an opportunity to quickly identify any information sources such as diaries, notes, computers and phones that might lead to a person's discovery. There may, however, be more subtle clues located within the home regarding the reasons for a person's disappearance that the police will also look for:

So we'll do a detailed search looking for paperwork, suicide notes, mobile phones, diaries.... If it's older folk sometimes ...[we will look for their] watch. ... To you and I a watch is just a watch but for an elderly person if they leave it behind there's a pretty good chance that they're going to throw themselves in the water and they don't want to lose that. Because the watch, for older people, gets passed down from generation to generation so it's a very valuable thing (POLSA).

This focus on the private space of the home will typically be complemented by the search of public spaces by deploying officers on the ground where the person was last seen and the gathering of CCTV evidence from relevant locations. In addition, virtual spaces in the form of police data bases and intelligence systems and the admissions records of local hospitals will be searched and this 'data mining' activity may also extend to mobile phone company records, transport company travel card information and, in high risk cases, bank records as all these sources may help reveal the movement of an individual.

If the person is not found within a few hours and they are graded as high risk, a 'division of investigative labour' is established. This results in greater task specialization, as the initial inquiry passes from uniformed officers to detectives and the expertise of police search advisors (POLSA's) and in some cases involves external organisations such as mountain rescue or lowland search groups (see Yarwood, 2010). Geographically this involves expanding the police's knowledge of the disappearance by extending the spatial boundaries

of searching beyond the missing person's home address. Several of the officers interviewed for this study spoke of the importance of 'instinct' and 'gut feelings' as important drivers of decisions about where to carry out these searches. Other officers, however, highlighted the importance of 'science' and 'evidence' in the form of spatial profiling as a way of guiding decision-making in the deployment of their limited resources. This approach has its origins in search management developed in the United States by national park rangers and mountain rescue personnel who were responsible for 'lost person' searches (Syrotuck 1975, 1976, Hill 1991, 1999) and focused on those who were 'unintentionally absent', as a result of becoming lost or disorientated. Building on this work, research conducted in the UK by Grampian Police represented the first attempt to provide spatial profiles to specifically aid police missing person investigations (ACPO 2006, Gibb and Woolnough, 2007). Based on a UK wide analysis of over 2000 police recorded missing person cases, Gibb and Woolnough (2007) used 'predictive' variables (including age, sex, suicide attempts, previous missing episodes, and mental condition) to 'predict' certain outcome characteristics' (including distance travelled, where the missing person might be located, and timescales in which they will be traced or found). For example, they indicate 70% of children aged 1-4 years old are traced within 26 minutes of being reported missing and within 750 metres of the place they are reported missing from and most are found playing in the street. If the person reported missing has suicidal tendencies, the Grampian analysis indicates that 70% of females who travel on foot are located within 3.2 kilometres of the place they are reported missing from and are likely to take their own life by drowning, whilst males are normally located within 1.3 kilometres of where they were last seen, are likely to be found in woodland and tend to commit suicide by hanging. Much like the use of profiling in criminal investigations, this kind of 'geo-demographic' profiling in relation to missing persons is a vital tool in the efficient use of limited resources, potentially reducing time spent searching locations where there is a low probability that the person will be found.

'Interpreting and understanding': 'placing' the missing person

As the process of identifying and acquiring knowledge through searching proceeds, detectives engage in the construction of case narratives attempting to tie 'people, places,

objects and phenomena together in a plausible chronology that provides details as to what happened and a degree of explanation as to why' (Innes, 2002, p.682). In building these narratives, police officers frame their understanding by drawing on a core set of scenarios. These include the possibility of a deliberate disappearance (such as suicide), criminality (perhaps involving abduction or murder) or that the person may have suffered an accident or become lost. By way of example, a POLSA confronted with a case involving a person reported missing and their car being found abandoned near a river, reflects on the range of likely scenarios:

[The car] probably arrived there about high tide mark, which would have been a good time to walk out and drown yourself, but we couldn't rule out under the circumstances that he may have come to harm at the hands of somebody else, he may have fallen in this very dark area of the boating lake ... and he has come to harm somewhere in the proximity or that he had wandered into the tide or the final one was that potentially that he has faked his disappearance because he'd been subject to a police investigation and had financial troubles. So you have five potential scenarios there and it was a case that you had to work through them (POLSA).

Such place-based, police-constructed scenarios may, however, come into conflict with alternative interpretations of a person's disappearance offered by family members based on their knowledge of the person. One important consequence of such conflicting interpretations can be different readings of the places which should be searched. In a case where a woman believed her husband had left to commit suicide and was of the view that he would have chosen the place to die very carefully, the police scenario was that he had left to have an affair. The wife felt frustrated that insights she could provide about where to search were not being taken seriously by the police:

I was saying if you found the car here then I think he will be in this radius because he couldn't walk that far ...and that he wouldn't be able to do very steep paths, they would be low paths, but because he was intelligent he would be aware of not being found on a path, but tucking himself away so he can't be found'. They [the police] were kinda like, 'well you know nothing because he wouldn't have left you'. (quoted in Parr and Stevenson, 2013, p.33).

These differences in the 'placing' of a missing person within police-constructed and family-constructed narratives can therefore have significant effects on the direction of an investigation and on families' perceptions of the police response. As Parr and Stevenson observe, 'When the police and family differ on the assumed motivation for the missing episode, this can have serious consequences for the type of search enquiry and for some families this is devastating, as they may feel their words, character witness and intimate knowledge of their missing relative is not being well regarded and utilised within the investigation' (Parr and Stevenson, 2013, p.33). While officers involved in the cases reviewed for this project indicated a respect for family witness accounts, they tended to be less aware of the need to build family knowledge of the places that might hold particular meaning for the missing person into investigative strategies on an equal basis to police knowledge.

In addition to the challenges of contested interpretations of a person's disappearance, there are also the uncertainties that surround any reading of likely geographical behaviours. These uncertainties may be case specific but they may also be premised on other general factors connected to cultural assumptions officers make about characteristics such as gender and mental health. Families of missing people report that officers sometimes interpret male disappearance as a 'normal' characteristic of young masculinity (see Parr and Stevenson, 2013), while females reported as missing are occasionally assumed to be more vulnerable. In one case involving the disappearance of a young woman, for example, the interpretation of the evidence gathered by officers during at the start of the enquiry favoured a narrative focused on suicidal intentions based partly on a reading of the condition of the woman's home. According to one of the first officers to respond: 'going by the state of the property, it was clear she might not be of stable mind ...it just builds a bigger picture that a bit more of a concern. Speaking to neighbours, speaking to the ex-boyfriend, by the end of that shift, I was thinking this person would be found dead in the next few days' (Police constable). An extensive search is mounted based on this interpretation of the woman's chaotic domestic environment and assumed mental fragility. After 7 days of increasingly intensive search resources being deployed and driven by assumptions of suicidal intent, the female is found safe and well. In another case, involving the disappearance of a young man, the discovery of his abandoned car near cliffs led police to conclude that he committed suicide although

his body had not been found. His parents maintained, however, that this scenario did not fit with their knowledge of their son and advanced their own narrative about his disappearance linked to a local landmark that was of particular interest to him and although this was searched and nothing found, the parents maintained that a more detailed search of the location was required.

These examples of the challenges around interpretation and understanding in missing persons investigations suggest that the police rely heavily on drawing abductive inferences (i.e. a process of reasoning to the best explanation, see Innes, 2007, p.267) as they synthesize the evidence they have to construct the most likely explanation for a person's disappearance. In this process of abductive inference, there may be a range of assumptions made by the police about an individual's spatial behaviour linked to issues like gender and mental health that are used to support particular readings of geographical evidence that may be contested by families or lead to forms of 'confirmation bias' through the marginalisation of alternative interpretations of the evidence surrounding a person's disappearance.

'Ordering and representing': defining the 'end of the world'

Interviews with officers consistently highlighted the importance of 'being able to represent a case to a person: why you had considered that, how you have eliminated that or how you have reduced that as a possibility' (POLSA). Senior officers will regularly review the progress of an inquiry, looking for reassurance that leads are being followed up, formal guidance and procedures are being followed and the nature and extent of the search is 'proportionate to the circumstances of disappearance' (ACPO, 2010, p.35). The use of spatial profiling techniques becomes important in this context because it can be used to legitimise decisions about the parameters of the search:

You have to use that data and you have to go to the SIO [Senior Investigating Officer] and say; "This is the data", if somebody's suicidal and they've parked their car they will be found within 900 metres from the car. ... If the SIO says: ... "I want you to go and search up that hill" ... you go back to them and say, "To search that hill will take 12 searchers, four days, however the statistics tell us that 99% of suicidal males that

park their car are found within 900 meters of it” and when you are faced with that sort of evidence then you’re weighing it up against the cost, the justification and that’s how you set a parameter (POLSA).

A key geographical notion deployed by investigating officers in their representation of the search to senior officers and to the families of missing people is that of ‘the end of the world’. At an instrumental level this simply refers to the maximum spatial area that the search should encompass given the information and intelligence about the person reported missing.

If you suspect somebody’s got on a bus or got in a taxi your end of the world could be very large because they could be 700 miles away. .. But if you’ve got a 19 year old bloke who goes missing after a night out, statistics will tell you he’s in the water [i.e. likely to have drowned] and you can pretty much narrow down your search (POLSA).

In a context of limited police resources, the notion of the ‘end of the world’ also has a broader normative meaning in terms of what a proportionate search should mean for different types of people reported missing. As Edkins (2011) has observed the personal can often become subsumed in general categorisations and scenarios in responses to ‘missingness’ and the police are confronted with precisely this challenges in having to make judgements about where to draw the line when searching for a missing person:

Say a small child wanders off from a primary school, you’d probably never call an end of the world [but] an old lady with dementia you probably will quite quickly. So when you’re faced with what you can call your end of the world that’s when you’re talking about boundaries (POLSA).

But the phrase ‘the end of the world’ also has a more complex set of meanings. In part this relates to the boundaries of reputational risk for the police and their concerns that a missing person is found within an area they might have been expected to have searched.

So if we’re looking for an old lady who’s missing and she’s found hooked up in a hedge in the back garden, the [police] force couldn’t live with her being found there...that would be terrible to the reputation of the force.... If she was found 2 or 3 miles away it’s reasonable to expect that you wouldn’t have searched the area’ (POLSA).

Not only are local policing reputations at stake, however, but also the longer term psychological well-being of families of missing persons. As Parr and Stevenson (2013) observe, 'Knowing that 'no stone has been left unturned' in the search was said to be important for a family's psychological recovery, serving to build positive perceptions of the local force and its reputation. Families reported that one of the key factors contributing towards a positive experience of police liaison lay in their clear understanding of police search decision-making and reasons for the parameters of the police search' (p.27). If these spatial parameters of a search are not well understood and the person remains missing, then months and years of psychological trauma may occur with continued family searching. How 'end-of-world' scenarios are arrived at and negotiated between police and families and who is invested within them are therefore of fundamental importance to longer term public trust and confidence in the police response to missing people.

Conclusions

This paper has unpacked the investigatory processes involved in missing persons cases and demonstrated how geographical notions of space and place play an important role in shaping and informing police practices in this field. The paper therefore adds not only to a small but growing research literature on missing persons but also to a wider body of work focused on understanding the interplay between policing, space and society (Fyfe, 1991). To date much of the latter has focused on observing the 'doing of policing', by using ethnography to reconstruct the time-space patterns and territorial dimensions of police work (see Fyfe, 1992 and Herbert, 1997). This paper, by contrast, has drawn on textual sources in the form of case files as well as interviews with practitioners to inform an argument about how ideas of space and place are key to understanding the 'investigative methodology' (Innes, 2002) of missing person cases. Further work in this area is needed. A College of Policing (2015) analysis of the demands on the police service shows that the police in England and Wales receive over 800 medium risk missing person reports every day, each of which requires approximately 18 hours of police time, equivalent to over 3 million investigation hours a year check. Against a background of declining police resources,

understanding better how this time is used and how investigatory practice can be improved should be a key priority for the future.

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